



FOUNDATIONS OF STRENGTH

by James Clear

“Before you pick up a barbell... read this.”

10 THINGS THIS GUIDE WILL TEACH YOU

1. Proven strategies to help you never miss a workout.
2. How to get over the motivation hump and exercise (even when you don't feel like it).
3. How to structure your workouts for long-term success.
4. How to decide what type of exercises you should do.
5. The most common strength training mistake that people make (and how to avoid it).
6. What to do when your workouts get difficult.
7. How to boost your confidence and believe in yourself.
8. How to determine which workouts will give you the body you want.
9. How to make smart decisions before, during, and after your workouts.
10. How to develop the most important skills of all: consistency and discipline.

The Details vs. The Fundamentals

The details of fitness – which exercises to do, what workout program to follow, how to improve your technique – these things are important. The details will always impact your progress to some degree.

But eventually, you begin to realize that what makes the real difference isn't the details. It's the fundamentals. The details in all areas of life – the newest workout routine, a nifty sales technique, the latest productivity hack – they can all be quickly copied or replicated.

Meanwhile, the fundamentals – the formation of good habits, the development of self-confidence, the cultivation of discipline – these things take time to develop and are very difficult to copy.

Your improvement rarely hinges upon your knowledge of the details, but rather on your consistent practice of the fundamentals. It's not the workout routine that leads to lasting change, it's developing the habit of never missing a workout. It's not the diet plan that revamps your health, it's sticking to it.

It's the discipline, not the details, that separates who you are today from who you want to become tomorrow. Whether you are looking to perform like an elite athlete or simply want to shed some extra weight, it's the daily habits that will change your life and carry you to your goals.

And yet, so often we spend all of our time searching for a “better” ideas instead of learning how to be more disciplined with the ideas we already have.

To put it another way: there are more workout routines and training plans than there are frat boys in unnecessary cutoff shirts, but there's almost no useful information on how to actually implement those routines.

And for that reason, *Foundations of Strength* has 2 primary goals:

1. To teach you useful strategies for building the habit of fitness (i.e. to make it easier for you to never miss workouts)
2. To hand you simple tips and guidelines for making smart decisions about what to do before, during, and after your workouts

Success in any field, and certainly in health and fitness, comes down to mastering the fundamentals. And the number one goal of this guide is to provide you with ideas and strategies that make it easier to master the fundamentals of strength and fitness.

With that in mind, let's talk about the *Foundations of Strength*.

Why Train for Strength?

I'll put it simply: physical strength is your best defense against illness, injury, and — ultimately — death.

Furthermore, strength training seems to accomplish most of our appearance-based goals in addition to improving our physical health. Women tend to get lean and toned while strength training. Men develop sculpted, natural muscles. Whether you're looking to perform like an elite athlete, handle the stresses of challenging work, or simply "get healthy" ... strength training will get you there.

But even with all of those benefits, the biggest thing you'll take away from strength training probably won't be physical at all.

After more than 10 years of strength training, here are the 3 biggest benefits of strength training that I've enjoyed.

1. Weightlifting Connects Your Body and Mind

Challenging your own body is the greatest method for discovering the strength of your mind.

Nowhere is this more true than with strength training. There will be days when you don't feel like coming into the gym. There will be sets that you don't feel like finishing. There will be times when everyone else in the gym will see you

fail.

And if you keep showing up anyway, then you'll develop the mental fortitude to get past failure, work when you don't feel like it, and discover what you're really made of mentally and physically.

To put it simply: pushing yourself physically reveals what you are made of mentally.

2. Weightlifting Solidifies Your Sense of Self-Worth

There is nothing more personal than your own body. Having confidence that you can move yourself through physical space with control and competence is a deeply satisfying feeling that filters into every other area of life. If you set a new personal record in the gym this morning, you can be sure that you'll be feeling more confident at work this afternoon.

But weightlifting goes deeper than that. Weight training gives you something to stand on, something to define yourself by. It clarifies who you are in your own mind.

"I can lift X pounds. I can do X sets. This is what I'm capable of. This is who I am."

With weightlifting, there's no lying to yourself about what you can and can't do. The weight forces you to be honest and self-aware.

Strangely, even if you're weaker than you thought you were, there is a satisfaction that comes from knowing where you stand. Most days, life seems to be lived in the gray areas. It's hard to know if you're making progress as a

parent, a friend, an employee, or a person. Weightlifting is more black and white. It helps you get past that fuzziness and closer to understanding yourself.

Combine this type of clarity with gradual improvement and your sense of self-worth will skyrocket. You know who you are and you are proving that you can become better than you were before.

“I lifted 10 pounds more today than I did last week. I can become better. This is proof.”

What could possibly be more confidence-building than direct, undeniable proof that you are becoming a better human?

Sometimes, this concrete proof of your improvement can do more for your confidence than all the positive thoughts in the world.

3. Strength Gives You More Opportunities to Contribute

This is the biggest benefit of weightlifting: it enables you to transform into a better version of yourself (more confident, more self-aware, more mentally and physically strong), so that you can become a better person for the people around you.

What I have gained from weightlifting – the resistance to illness and injury, the confidence in my abilities, the awareness of my limitations – has positioned me to make a bigger impact and contribute more value than I could have before training.

Happy and healthy people have a better chance to live with confidence and contribute value to the world than anyone else.

Identity First: How to Become the Type of Person Who Can Be Strong

Change is difficult. Even if you are inspired and motivated to lose weight or become stronger, it's tough to actually stick to new behaviors, new training routines, and new workout programs. It's more likely that by this time next year you'll be doing the same thing than performing a new habit with ease.

That is why the key to building lasting habits is focusing on creating a new identity before worrying about how you want to perform or look.

Your current behaviors are simply a reflection of your current identity. What you do now is a reflection of the type of person that you believe that you are (either consciously or subconsciously). To change your behavior for good, you need to start believing new things about yourself.

To understand why this is true, imagine how we typically set goals...

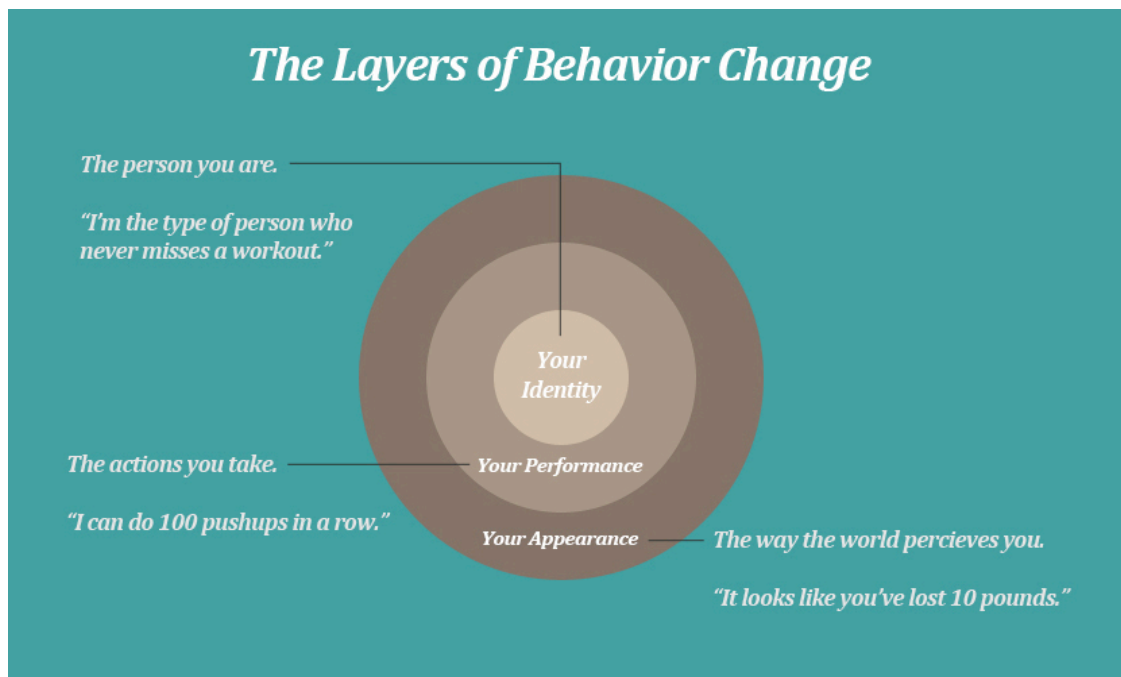
You might start by saying "I want to lose weight" or "I want to get stronger." If you're lucky, someone might say, "That's great, but you should be more specific." So then you say, "I want to lose 30 pounds" or "I want to squat 300 pounds."

These goals are centered around our performance or our appearance.

Performance and appearance goals are great, but they aren't the same as habits. If you're already doing a behavior, then these types of goals can help drive you

forward. But if you're trying to start a new behavior, then you will be more likely to stick with your new habit by starting with an identity-based goal.

The image below shows the difference between identity-based goals and performance and appearance-based goals.



The interior of behavior change and building better habits is your identity. Each action you perform is driven by the fundamental belief that it is possible. So if you change your identity (the type of person that you believe that you are), then it's easier to change your actions.

The reason why it's so hard to stick to new habits is that we often try to achieve a performance or appearance-based goal without changing our identity. Most of the time we try to achieve results before proving to ourselves that we have the identity of the type of person we want to become. It should be the other way around.

The Recipe for Sustained Success

Changing your beliefs isn't nearly as hard as you might think. There are two steps.

1. Decide the type of person you want to be.
2. Prove it to yourself with small wins.

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to start with incredibly small steps. The goal is not to achieve results at first, the goal is to become the type of person who can achieve those things.

For example, a person who works out consistently is the type of person who can become strong. Develop the identity of someone who works out first, and then move on to performance and appearance later.

Start small and trust that the results will come as you develop a new identity.

Want to lose weight?

Identity: Become the type of person who moves more every day.

Small win: Buy a pedometer. Walk 50 steps when you get home from work. Tomorrow, walk 100 steps. The day after that, 150 steps. If you do this 5 days per week and add 50 steps each day, then by the end of the year, you'll be walking over 10,000 steps per day.

Want to become strong?

Identity: Become the type of person who never misses a workout.

Small win: Do pushups every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

What is your identity?

In my experience, when you want to become better at something, proving your identity to yourself is far more important than getting amazing results. This is especially true at first.

If you want to get motivated and inspired, then feel free to watch a YouTube video, listen to your favorite song, and do P90X. But don't be surprised if you burn out after a week. You can't rely on being motivated. You have to become the type of person you want to be, and that starts with proving your new identity to yourself.

Most people (myself included) want to become better. Many of us, however, will set performance and appearance-based goals in hopes that they will drive us to do things differently.

If you're looking to make a lasting change, then I say stop worrying about results and start worrying about your identity. Become the type of person who can achieve the things you want to achieve. Build the habit now. The results can come later.

The Difference Between Professionals and Amateurs

“Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us just show up and get to work.”

-Chuck Close

If you study the top performers in any field, you'll notice that they share one thing in common: they get to work whether they feel motivated or not.

The ability to show up everyday, stick to your schedule, and do the work – especially when you don't feel like it – is so valuable that it is literally the only skill you need to master to out perform 99% of people. To put it another way: never miss a workout and you'll have no trouble getting in the best shape of your life.

Of course, approaching your strength goals with the attitude of a professional might be simple, but it certainly isn't easy.

Being a pro is about having the discipline to commit to what is important to you instead of merely saying something important to you. It's about starting when you feel like stopping, not because you want to work more, but because your goal is important enough to you that you don't simply work on it when it's convenient. Becoming a pro is about making your priorities a reality.

I can guarantee that if you set a schedule for any task and start sticking to it, there will be days when you feel like quitting. When you're at the gym, there will always be sets that you don't feel like finishing. But stepping up when it's

annoying or draining to do so, that's what makes you a pro.

Professionals stick to the schedule, amateurs let life get in the way.

Professionals know what is important to them and work towards it with purpose, amateurs get pulled off course by the urgencies of life.

Becoming a pro doesn't mean you're a workaholic or a maniac who is obsessed with getting results at any cost. It just means that you're good at making time for what matters to you – especially when you don't feel like it – instead of playing the role of the victim and letting life happen to you.

Don't rely on motivation to get you into shape. Motivation is fickle. The goal is to be disciplined, not motivated. If you're serious about becoming stronger, leaner, and more athletic, then you'll have to stick to a schedule like a professional.

If you only train when you feel motivated, then you'll never be consistent enough to become a professional.

Set a Schedule, Not a Deadline

When it comes to getting strong, there is one thing that is more important than anything else: training consistently.

Above all else – more important than perfecting your technique, more important than following the right program – is the simple fact that you don't miss workouts. Keep showing up and you're bound to make progress.

But if it's so simple, why do we struggle so much?

Here's one common mistake that we all make (myself included): we set a deadline, but not a schedule. In other words, we let our goals distract us from our habits.

We focus on the end goal that we want to achieve and the deadline we want to do it by. We say things like, "I want to lose 20 pounds by the summer" or "I want to add 50 pounds to my bench press in the next 12 weeks."

The problem with this is that if we don't magically hit the arbitrary timeline that we set in the beginning, then we feel like a failure ... even if we are better off than we were at the start. The end result, sadly, is that we often become demotivated if we don't reach our goal by the initial deadline.

In my experience, a better way to approach your goals is to set a schedule to operate by rather than a deadline to perform by.

Don't map out how much weight you want to lose each week or the strength gains you want to make. "Lose 5 pounds" is not an action you can perform. "Do three sets of squats" is an action you can perform. Set your schedule based on actions you can do, not results that you want.

Instead of giving yourself a deadline to accomplish a particular goal (and then feeling like a failure if you don't achieve it), you should choose a goal that is important to you and then set a schedule to work towards it consistently.

That might not sound like a big shift, but it is. Following schedules removes the pressure of reaching a strength or fitness goal by a particular timeframe and sets you up to train consistently for the long haul. In other words, it pushes you towards developing the habit of becoming strong rather than seeing strength as a finish line to race towards.

If you want to be the type of person who accomplishes things on a consistent basis, then give yourself a schedule to follow, not a deadline to race towards.

Focus on the Practice, Not the Performance

“Don’t be a lifter, be lifting.”

Productive and successful people practice the things that are important to them on a consistent basis. The best weightlifters are in the gym at the same time every week. The best writers are sitting down at the keyboard every day. And this same principle applies to the best leaders, parents, managers, musicians, and doctors.

It’s not about the performance, it’s about the continual practice. Your focus should be on doing the action and repeating the habit, not on achieving an arbitrary goal by a certain date.

The schedule is your friend. You can't predict when your body feels like setting a new personal record, but the schedule can make sure that you're in the gym whether you feel like it or not.

Start Small

It's your habits that have made you who you are right now, and it's your new habits that will take you to the next level. What got you here, won't get you there.

The good news? You don't need to get “there” tomorrow. Take it slow. Start small. Right now, your only goal should be to stick to your workout schedule for one week.

Stop thinking about how hard it will be to follow a schedule for a month or a year. Just follow it for this week. For the next 7 days, don't let distractions get in the way. For the next 7 days, show up at every workout. Setting a schedule doesn't make you a professional, following it does.

For one week, do the things you want to do without letting life get in the way. Next week, repeat.

Use the Answers You Already Have

Everyone wants the golden idea that will make it easy to become lean, strong, and healthy.

Weightlifters debate over tiny technique changes for hours. Beginners search for days for the best workout routine, only to find a new one the next week. Lovers of the Vegan and Paleo diets will start a food fight over which one is better.

It's only natural to want the best information for our bodies, but when the details get in the way of the fundamentals, when planning becomes a form of procrastination, it's no longer beneficial to obsess over finding the best information.

If you find yourself getting sucked into a debate about fitness or spiraling down the rabbit hole of research, then here's the best thing to do: implement the answers you already have.

Most of the time we have 90% of the answers we need, but waste half of our lives searching for the last 10%. You're already filled with information that could benefit you, if you consistently acted on it. Learning is the easy part, it's the application that's hard.

You don't need more motivation or a better plan, you simply need to act on what you already know. If you wait for perfect conditions, then you'll never get anything done.

Train the Way You Want to Look

“Train the way you want your body to adapt to training.”

–Dan John

Take a look at swimmers, cyclists, olympic lifters, powerlifters, bodybuilders, marathoners, gymnasts, sprinters, and professional athletes of all types.

What do those people have in common?

They are all incredibly fit. Their bodies are not the same – some are muscular and explosive, while others are lean and built for endurance – but they are all in shape. If you’re still debating which exercise program works, the top athletes in every sport should be an indication: they all work.

There is no best exercise, there’s only what is best for you. You’ll find fit people doing everything under the sun.

The question isn’t, “What type of exercise works?” The question is, “How do I want to look? How do I want my body to perform? What do I want to be good at?”

If you want to be built like a sprinter, then go sprint. On the flip side, don’t expect to look like a professional volleyball player if you run on the treadmill twice a week. Train the way you want your body to adapt.

Your Body Will Adapt Until It Reaches a “New Normal”

Here's a basic rule of the human body: it will adapt to any stimulus placed upon it until it reaches a new equilibrium or a “new normal.”

For example, let's say that you haven't been doing any pushups recently. If you start doing 1 set of 10 pushups each day, then your body will begin to adapt. It will build muscle in your chest, shoulders, and arms ... but not forever.

At some point, doing 10 pushups each day will become the “new normal” for your body and it will have sufficiently adapted to this pattern. Your body doesn't need more muscle to perform 10 pushups effectively, and so it stops building muscle.

Despite how obvious this may sound, it's remarkable how often we do the same workouts over and over again, and walk around scratching our heads wondering why we aren't losing weight or gaining strength.

The body you have right now is a result of the recent stimulus that has been placed upon it. If you want to improve, then you need to place a new stimulus on your body. You cannot change if things stay the same. (I can't believe I even wrote that, but it is as true as anything I've ever said.)

To become better, you have to act differently. Sounds simple, but how often do you choose to do something outside your ordinary routine?

Know Your Why

If you know what you want, then getting it is much easier.

Why are you working out? Why are you training? Why do you want to be healthier or stronger or more athletic?

It could be for your family, it could be for your team, it could be for yourself. You have to decide. Having a sense of purpose is everything.

This may sound simple and basic, but in my experience even people who are smart and talented rarely know exactly what they are working for and why. Be clear about where you're headed and why you're going there.

Develop Your Routine

What can you do on a daily basis to make it easier to not miss workouts?

Developing a pre-workout routine is a great way to get over the motivation hump and workout even when you don't feel like it.

If you look at top performers in any field, you'll see similar patterns all over the place. NBA players who do the same thing before every free throw shot. Comedians who recite the same words before they step onto stage. Corporate executives who follow the same meditation sequence every morning.

Do you think these people always feel motivated? No way.

It doesn't matter how talented you are, there are bound to be days when you don't feel like showing up. There will be workouts that you don't feel like starting and there will be "off days" when your energy and emotions are in the gutter.

But top performers use little routines to pull them into the right mental state, regardless of how they feel. Imagine if you had a routine that could pull you into "exercise mode" or "training mode", no matter how little motivation you had that day.

Here's how to do it...

Step 1: A good pre-workout routine starts by being so easy that you can't say

no to it. You shouldn't need motivation to start your pre-workout routine.

For example, my weightlifting routine starts by putting on my lifting shoes and wrist wraps. It's so easy that I can't say no, but by the time I'm done doing those two things, I'm usually more motivated to workout.

The most important part of any task is starting. If you can't get motivated in the beginning, then you'll find that motivation often comes after starting. That's why your pre-workout routine needs to be incredibly easy to start.

For example, you could create an exercise routine that starts with filling up your water bottle. That way, when you don't feel like working out, you can simply tell yourself, "Just fill up the water bottle." Your only goal is to start the routine and then continue from there.

Step 2: Your routine should get you *moving* towards the end goal.

Most of the time, your routine should include physical movement. It's hard to think yourself into getting motivated.

Here's why...

What is your body language like when you're feeling unmotivated or lacking energy?

Answer: You're not moving very much. Maybe you're slumped over like a blob, slowly melting into the couch. This lack of physical movement is directly linked to a lack of mental energy.

The opposite is also true. If you're physically moving and engaged, then it's far more likely that you'll feel mentally engaged and energized. For example, it's almost impossible to not feel vibrant, awake, and energized when you're

dancing.

While your routine should be as easy as possible to start, it should gradually transition into more and more physical movement. Your mind and your motivation will follow your physical movement.

Step 3: You need to follow the same pattern every single time.

The primary purpose of your pre-workout routine is to create a series of events that you always perform before doing a specific task. Your pre-workout routine tells your mind, "This is what happens before I do ____."

Eventually, this routine becomes so tied to your performance that by simply doing the routine, you are pulled into a mental state that is primed to perform. You don't need motivation, you just need to start your routine. Your pre-workout routine becomes the trigger that kickstarts your habit, even if you're not motivated to do it.

This is important because when you don't feel motivated, it's often too much work to figure out what you should do next. When faced with another decision, you will often decide to just quit. However, the pre-workout routine solves that problem because you know exactly what to do next. There's no debating or decision making. You just follow the pattern.

If you build small routines and patterns that help you overcome the daily battles, then you'll continue the slow march towards greatness even when it gets tough.

Do the Most Important Thing First

In the summer of 2010, I returned to the United States after living in Scotland for a few months. My time in Scotland was incredible, but I didn't have the opportunity to make it to the gym very often. After a few months of only doing bodyweight exercises, I returned home committed to increasing my leg strength.

I decided that the squat would be the most important exercise for me. I made it the first exercise of every workout. At first, I squatted twice per week and after 6 weeks or so, I increased that to three times per week.

On April 1st, I squatted 176 pounds. Exactly 15 weeks later, on July 14th, I squatted 353 pounds. In just 105 days, I had doubled my leg strength.

Here's a graph of the progress I made, plotting my maximum weight from each workout.



There are plenty of reasons why I improved so rapidly (good coaching, good nutrition, proper rest, rebounding from time off, and so on), but it was also the first time in my life that I had made one exercise the most important and put it first in all of my workouts.

If you search for different workout programs and templates you'll find almost every version you can imagine, but I'm a big fan of keeping things simple and putting the most important exercise first. When it comes to designing your own workouts, decide what you want to be good at and focus your best energy and effort into that movement.

Always Train for Volume Before Intensity

Your audacious life goals are fabulous. We're proud of you for having them. But it's possible that those goals are designed to distract you from the thing that's really frightening you—the shift in daily habits that would mean a re-invention of how you see yourself.

—Seth Godin

I think the single biggest mistake that is made in fitness is choosing intensity before building up volume.

It's a great to be motivated and inspired to become better. You'll never hear me bash someone for dreaming big. But those big dream can easily lure you into biting off more than you can chew.

As a result, it's dangerously easy to find yourself jumping into the deep end and burning yourself out, rather than building the foundation of a champion.

Too often, we let our motivations and desires drive us into a frenzy as we try to solve our entire problem at once instead of starting a small, new routine.

I know, I know. It's not nearly as sexy as saying you lost 30 pounds in 3 months. But the truth is that the dreams that you have are very different from the actions that will get you there.

If you're serious about making real change — in other words, if you're serious about doing things better than you are now — then you have to start small.

In the beginning, you should always choose volume over intensity. Do more

reps instead of picking a higher weight. Start with a weight that is easy and do an extra set. Build up slowly.

Do the same weight for a week or two, then add just a little bit. Repeat that sequence. Your workouts might be easy for the first month. That's fine. The weight will get heavy enough, fast enough. Trust me.

Build the foundation, then move up.

As the weight gradually gets heavier, your body will be able to handle the intensity. You'll have a solid foundation to stand on.

The typical approach is to dive into the deep end as soon as you get an inspiring dose of motivation, only to fail quickly and wish you had more willpower as you wear yourself down mentally and physically.

Hold onto your dream, but don't be fooled by motivation. Wade into the shallow water, slowly going deeper, until you reach the point where you can swim whether you're motivated or not.

Train volume before intensity.

Big Movements Result in Big Improvements

As a general rule of thumb, if you're unsure about which exercises are more beneficial, choose the one that moves more of your body.

I believe that 99% of the population could get in the best shape of their life with only eight exercises: snatch, clean and jerk, squat, bench press, deadlift, pushups, pullups, and sprints. These exercises are often referred to as compound movements.

If you did those exercises and did them well, then that's all you would ever need. In fact, you could get in fantastic shape by slowly working up to doing pushups, pullups, and sprints.

The idea that big movements result in big improvements is a very common sense strategy.

For example, how many fewer steps do you think the average person takes each day compared to the average NBA player? Who do you think spends more time moving and doing big movements like running and jumping?

Do you think it's any coincidence that NBA players are in fantastic shape when they spend hours every day jumping and sprinting down the court? You may not have the genetic makeup of a professional athlete, but it's impossible to deny that you would be in better shape if you trained like one.

When in doubt, move more.

When the Going Get Tough, Rest.

I have a simple rule of thumb that guides how much rest I give myself both during and in between workouts. If I'm increasing the intensity of a workout and I start to struggle, then I simply double the rest period.

For example, if I'm resting 2 minutes between sets of pushups and that turns out to be too difficult, then I'll double the rest period and wait 4 minutes between sets. The next workout, I can take it down a notch and rest for 3 minutes. Eventually, I'll work back down to doing the new number of reps at the shorter rest period, but to start, I usually double the rest.

A similar approach can be taken in between workouts. Let's say that you start to feel drained and tired after squatting every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. You're not just tired from the workout, but you're wearing yourself down and it's hard to recover in time for the next workout.

Instead of resting one or two days between squat workouts, I would double it and only squat twice per week.

Figuring out how your body recovers best may be your next big hurdle to making strength gains.

With Slow and Consistent Change, Anything is Possible

*Never give up on a dream just because of the time it will take to accomplish it.
The time will pass anyway.*

–Earl Nightingale

Anyone can get in fantastic shape simply by doing pushups, pullups, and sprints. And none of those exercises require any type of training equipment.

But if you can't do those exercises yet, then simply start small and work your way up. For example, start by walking. The next workout, try to walk a little bit farther. Eventually, you can try walking faster. (Remember, volume before intensity.)

After walking for a few months, you can transition to jogging. And then to sprinting at half speed. And finally to sprinting at full speed.

This same approach of starting small, remaining consistent and always doing your workouts, and slowly increasing the volume and intensity will result in amazing improvements.

Who you are today is not who you have to be tomorrow.

What You Should Do Now

Don't just read this book and move on. Do something.

Here are some action steps that you should take based on the information we've covered in this guide.

1. Determine the identity you want to have.
2. Decide what is important to you.
3. Set a schedule for your training, not a deadline.
4. Develop a routine to help you workout even when you're not motivated.
5. Do the most important thing first.
6. Train for volume before increasing the intensity.
7. Move slowly, but never stop.

Thanks for reading!

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